

Performative privacy in a surveillance economy



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In 2020, I lost my entire online presence. All my social media accounts were hijacked through session cookies, and I was locked out. My accounts and associated pages were later used to run Vietnamese propaganda ads. I managed to block all my cards in time, but the damage was already done. This left me devastated, embarrassed, and powerless.

Over the past five years, I have become increasingly conscious of online privacy. I have undergone a comprehensive security overhaul of my home network and its devices. I'm doing all I can to protect myself from hackers and scammers, but at the same time, I'm voluntarily sharing a lot of my data with artificial intelligence models like ChatGPT and handing over live photos and NID scans for platform verification. I also rarely mute my Google Nest speaker. All these habits often make me wonder if my digital privacy practices are just performative.

Performative privacy

After some research, I realised I'm not alone. The idea that people treat privacy more as a performance than as genuine protection is not new. A UK government-funded study conducted in 2022 found that while 77 percent of adults express concerns about online privacy, only 31 percent actively refuse marketing cookies when given the choice. This gap between people's intentions and actions is known as the privacy paradox. It shows us that online privacy is less about firm principles and more about negotiation, influenced by convenience and a growing sense of resignation.

This resignation has a name, too: privacy

cynicism. It's the sinking belief that no matter what you do, your data is already out there. And when you feel powerless, you stop trying.

Cornell Professor Helen Nissenbaum offers an alternative perspective with her concept of contextual integrity. She explains that privacy doesn't mean keeping everything a secret, but rather making sure information only moves in ways that fit the situation. For example, sharing health details with a doctor makes sense, but sharing them with an advertiser does not.

These ideas help define performative privacy in the digital space. It is a set of actions we take that gives us the illusion of being in control of our data. However, it fails to change how authorities and big tech use surveillance systems to exploit said data. Our actions may demonstrate resistance, but the structures that influence data flows rarely change.

The illusion of control via compliance

Even the actions we take towards privacy are rarely what they seem. For example, one of the preconditions for compliance is the use of cookie banners. Many countries require websites to display a banner that prompts users to give their consent before collecting data.

However, there are numerous loopholes. In a critique of California Privacy Rights Act's (CPRA) regulations, an article in *The University of Chicago Business Law Review* pointed out that 80.9 percent of cookie-consent notices contain dark patterns, such as large "accept" buttons contrasted with hidden or obscured "reject" options.

In Bangladesh, most websites do not even

bother with California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) or General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-style banners. At best, you get a one-liner: "By using this site, you accept cookies." A notable example of its consequences would be when, earlier this year, the Election Commission discovered that five organisations were leaking NID data. And as Dwight Schrute said, "Identity theft is not a joke, Jim. Millions of families

leaks your data 300 billion times daily. In Europe, that number is close to 200 billion. RTB has been called the biggest data breach ever recorded. And the worst part is that it's ongoing.

This is surveillance capitalism in practice. Shoshana Zuboff, who coined this term, warned that no democracy can survive a model built on manipulating human behaviour for profit.



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

suffer every year."

Surveillance capitalism in action

My experience made me feel like I was robbed. But what's worse is that we let ourselves be robbed by Big Tech every day. And most of the time, we don't even notice.

Your data is mostly used for targeted advertising, and the system that runs the show is called real-time bidding (RTB). Every time you load a page that shows ads, your personal data (location, browsing history, device information, etc) is auctioned off to the highest bidder in milliseconds.

In the US alone, Google's ad exchange

So how do they get away with it? Are there no laws protecting us from this?

In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is the gold standard for data protection. Each European country has its own regulator that enforces the GDPR. So far, these regulators have issued over 6 billion pound in penalties. However, Big Tech continues to evade scrutiny because the regulators are slow, causing cases to drag on for years, and fines become just another operating cost for them. Meanwhile, the auction keeps running. Thus, the GDPR has proved that strong privacy laws can be written, but enforcing them against Big Tech

Can participatory budgeting work in Dhaka?



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Democracy in Bangladesh often feels like a ritual performed every few years at the ballot box. Citizens queue to cast votes, political parties campaign fiercely, and once the ballots are counted, the machinery of governance continues at a distance. For most Dhaka residents, the inner workings of city governance, primarily how funds are allocated, remain hidden. The streets are paved, drains are dug, contracts are awarded, yet very few citizens know how or why these priorities were chosen. This distance between taxpayers and decision-makers erodes trust, weakens accountability, and fuels a culture of cynicism.

But democracy can be more than the right to vote every five years. Across the world, a new practice is reshaping how cities make decisions: participatory budgeting (PB). The idea is simple yet radical: ordinary citizens directly deliberate and decide how portions of a city's budget are spent. What began as an experiment in Brazil's Porto Alegre in 1989 has since spread to more than 7,000 cities worldwide, giving people a real say in projects—ranging from clean water systems to playgrounds. In Porto Alegre, slum residents gained paved roads, schools, and sanitation because they had a voice in budget allocation.

In Bangladesh, too, at the union parishad

level, NGOs and international agencies have supported "open budget sessions" where villagers could hear about allocations and suggest priorities. The United Nations has documented several of these grassroots experiments, noting that they encourage dialogue and raise awareness. Yet in practice, these sessions often fall short of genuine power-sharing: the budget is still prepared behind closed doors, with limited capacity for citizens to redirect spending.

Nowhere is the gap more evident than in Dhaka. A 2020 study of Dhaka South City Corporation revealed that 96 percent of respondents were unaware of the corporation's budget, and only four percent were aware of the corporation's development projects. Officials often declined to provide information proactively, which reinforces the fact that the city's finances are a mystery to ordinary taxpayers. If most residents of a megacity remain unaware of how public money is spent, can we truly call this an inclusive democracy?

Dhaka is uniquely in need of participatory budgeting because its governance is very fragmented. Authority is divided between two city corporations, Rajuk, ministries, and utility boards, creating overlaps and gaps that leave citizens with little clarity on who is

responsible for what. In such a system, giving residents a direct role in deciding even a share of local budgets could help clarify the process and make governance feel more tangible, visible, and accountable.

Participatory budgeting in Dhaka could start modestly. Imagine if each ward set aside just one to two percent of its annual development funds for citizen decision. Residents could propose projects, deliberate

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in local meetings, and cast their votes. In one neighbourhood, the priority might be drainage; in another, safe pedestrian crossings; in another, community clinics. The process could be supported through hybrid mechanisms: digital platforms and SMS voting for younger and more connected residents, combined with ward sabha (public

assemblies) for those without internet access.

However, a significant risk can be elite capture, where wealthier or better-organised groups may hijack the process to secure benefits for themselves. This problem has been noted in global studies, and recent research suggests safeguards, such as ranked voting systems or point-based allocations to ensure more equitable outcomes. In Dhaka, such mechanisms could be coupled with geographic fairness rules, ensuring that each ward or cluster receives a minimum allocation.

Another obstacle is bureaucratic resistance. City officials and councillors may see participatory budgeting as a threat to their discretion, or as yet another burden. Overcoming this requires both political will and legal backing. The city corporations would need to institutionalise PB in their regulations, publish transparent dashboards showing which projects were voted for and how much was allocated, and invite citizens to track whether implementation matches promises. If the Governance Innovation Unit, which already promotes public sector innovation, were to support this experiment, it could lend crucial legitimacy.

Participation must also be inclusive. Dhaka's poor women and marginalised groups are often excluded from formal politics. Yet, international practice shows that participatory budgeting can empower precisely those groups if designed with sensitivity. Gender-responsive budgeting is one pathway to ensuring that issues like sanitation, lighting, and childcare, which disproportionately affect women, are prioritised. Rotating facilitators, translation for low-literacy participants, and quotas for representation can all help broaden the range of voices that get heard.

If such a pilot were launched in Dhaka, say, in two wards of each city corporation, the results could be transformative. Citizens would see that their taxes actually translated into visible outcomes they chose. Authorities would face more substantial incentives to deliver, as projects would be directly linked to citizen votes. Over time, participatory budgeting could become embedded in city culture, just as open budget sessions have slowly taken root at the village level. The efficiency of local government, often questioned in Bangladesh, could be revamped through this practice of shared power.

The larger point is that democracy cannot remain a passive spectator sport. Casting a ballot is essential, but it is not enough to create trust in institutions. What sustains democracy is the everyday experience of being heard and seeing one's choices reflected in tangible improvements. For Dhaka, with more than 20 million residents and countless infrastructural challenges, the stakes are high.

The shift from vote to voice will not happen overnight. It will demand experimentation, safeguards, and perhaps some failures. However, dismissing the idea is to resign ourselves to a city where budgets are drawn up in secrecy and citizens remain perpetually in the dark. Participatory budgeting offers a chance, slight at first but potentially profound, for Dhaka to show that democracy can be more than symbolic.

When residents of this city can point to a new drainage system, a repaired footpath, or a community library and say, "We chose this," democracy will no longer be only about elections. It will be about everyday voice, and everyday power. That is a vision worth striving for.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Skating category
- 6 Angel toppers
- 11 Snowy bird
- 12 Make suitable
- 13 Mob foe
- 15 Filmmaker Burns
- 16 Pale
- 17 Historic time
- 18 Waterproofing stuff
- 20 Beam of light
- 21 Tick off
- 22 Lug
- 23 Incline
- 26 Grew dimmer
- 27 Sunset site
- 28 Card symbol
- 29 Drama division
- 30 West African nation
- 34 Goat sound
- 35 Finish
- 36 "Caught you!"
- 37 2, 3, or 5
- 40 Fielder's goof
- 41 Like the ice caps
- 42 Ocean trenches
- 43 Squalid

DOWN

- 1 Quick kisses
- 2 Be of one mind
- 3 "Three Sisters" sister
- 4 "Stand" band
- 5 "Harvey" star
- 6 Regular hangout
- 7 TV spots
- 8 Subsequently
- 9 Run
- 10 Got off course
- 14 Vault setting
- 19 Dryer fuzz
- 22 Race goal
- 23 Under a pile of work
- 24 "Smiley's People" author
- 25 "Top Hat" star
- 26 Pitcher's motions
- 28 Ivy League school
- 30 Prophets
- 31 Roof feature
- 32 In the future
- 33 Bird on a court
- 38 Swabbing tool
- 39 One of the Stooges

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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